



Wildfires ravaged the West considerably earlier than usual

# FIGHTING WILDFIRE WARS

Story by  
MSG Bob Haskell

**H**OMELAND security has meant new and different things to many National Guard soldiers since terrorists targeted America last September. It's not, however, a new concept to Guard soldiers like SPC Charles Ginter of South Dakota, who associates homeland defense with protecting people from the terrors of Western wildfires.

"As far as the home front is concerned, we're in the thick of it right now," Ginter said recently, while training near Rapid City, S.D., to take his place on the front line should a wildfire threaten his drought-parched home state. "If we're not doing our federal mission, it makes perfectly good sense to do this here at home."

Ginter was one of seven members of the South Dakota Army Guard's 216th Engineer Detachment firefighting team to earn their red cards and be sanctioned by the state's Department of Agriculture Wildlife Fire Suppression unit as trained

frontline wildfire fighters in mid-June.

It was timely training because wildfires were already ravaging the West considerably earlier than usual, fueled by some of the driest conditions ever recorded, thanks to a two-year drought that officials have blamed on La Niña. The Washington Post reported that more than 18 large fires in six states had charred 2 million acres, "consuming acreage at a pace roughly double the 10-year average."

A battalion-size group of Army National Guard troops was called to state active duty in Colorado and Arizona to help deal with the largest fires in those states' histories — fires allegedly ignited by people employed to fend them off.

And four Air National Guard C-130 transports from North Carolina were flown to Colorado to fight the fires from the air, along with two similar aircraft belonging to the Air Force Reserve.

All six planes were sent to South Dakota to dump fire-retardant chemicals on a blaze that threatened the tourist town of Deadwood, said Air

National Interagency Fire Center (main), MSG Bob Haskell (inset)

South Dakota Army Guard soldiers (inset) were among those on the firelines as wildfires ravaged the West (main picture) during the record-setting 2002 fire season.

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Heike Hasenauer

**National Guard helicopters were instrumental in tracking and combatting several of the season's fires, providing both transportation for firefighters and direct attack using sling-loaded water buckets.**

Force Reserve Tech. Sgt. Dave Morton.

National Guard members have already spent the past year pulling security duty at more than 400 civilian airports, staffing checkpoints on the borders with Canada and Mexico, and deploying to Guantanamo Bay Naval Station in Cuba to help guard detainees accused of belonging to Taliban and al-Qaida terrorist cells.

By June, the early wildfire season was the new twist in homeland defense for the National Guard.

Specifically, nearly 300 Army Guard troops in Arizona had pulled security duty with police officers at evacuated communities and were staffing armories for people seeking refuge from a 463,000-acre fire that had destroyed at least 423 houses and forced 30,000 people to be evacuated from nine towns.

The Guard mission wound down in June, because the fire that had threatened Show Low was 35 percent contained and 25,000 residents were returning to their homes, said Arizona Army Guard MAJ Harold Jones.

However, another 550 Guard troops were standing by, just in case they were needed, Jones said. Approximately 185 Army Guard troops were on duty in Colorado's Pike National Forest where the Hayman fire, allegedly set by a U.S. Forest Service worker, had scorched 137,000 acres, destroyed at least 133 houses and, according to an Associated Press

report, had cost more than \$29 million to fight.

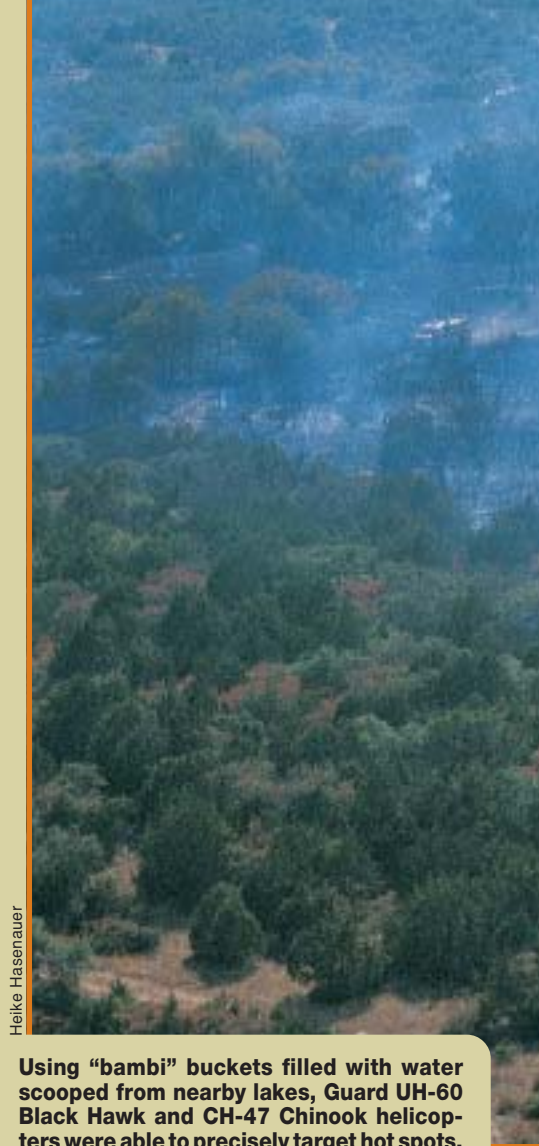
Colorado Guard soldiers transported firefighters and equipment and provided security personnel for fires at Black Mountain, the Coal Seam, Missionary Ridge and the Pike National Forest, said Colorado Guard spokeswoman 1LT Holly Peterson.

And the North Carolina Air Guard's 145th Air Wing, in Charlotte, sent four C-130s — which can each drop 3,000 gallons of chemical retardant in about five seconds — to Peterson Air Force Base in central Colorado to support that effort.

The North Carolina Guard unit joined forces with the crews of the two Air Force Reserve planes from the 302nd Air Wing, based at Peterson. In all, about 100 Air Guard and Reserve personnel were on duty there.

The six planes, each equipped with the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System, were flying between 12 and 20 sorties per day, said Morton, a 302nd spokesman.

All six planes were needed at the



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**Using "bambi" buckets filled with water scooped from nearby lakes, Guard UH-60 Black Hawk and CH-47 Chinook helicopters were able to precisely target hot spots.**

end of June to fight the Grizzly Gulch fire in South Dakota, he said.

That's where Guard troops — like Ginter and 1LT Stuart Muzzy, the commander of the 216th Engr. Det. firefighting team — were primed to reinforce the state's civilian force, which was stretched to the limit. Many of those firefighters had been dispatched to Colorado, said LaVerne Hermanson, the South Dakota Wildlife Fire Suppression unit's chief trainer and safety officer.

*In addition to fighting fires, National Guard members during the past year pulled security duty at more than 400 civilian airports, staffed checkpoints on the borders with Canada and Mexico, and deployed to Guantanamo Bay Naval Station in Cuba to help guard detainees accused of belonging to Taliban and al-Qaida terrorist cells.*





*In mid-June, more than 18 large fires in six states had charred 2 million acres, consuming acreage at a pace roughly double the 10-year average.*

The Guard soldiers got four full days of training — lectures in a classroom and digging firebreaks and cutting trees in the field — at Camp Rapid before Hermanson issued them red cards. They could then work on the front line of a wildfire for 12 or 14 hours a day and for 15 days at a time.

“The most important thing you do out there is to go home at night,” Hermanson told the soldiers.

“Our adjutant general does not want to get caught by surprise,” Muzzy said about the importance of the training. “If a lot of our civilian resources are in Colorado, and the Black Hills go up, who do you use? The National Guard.”

Ginter is getting to be an old hand at fighting wildfires. The college student helped protect buildings at the Custer Boy Scout Camp from the Jasper fire that scorched 80,000 acres in South Dakota in August 2000.

Now he has been recertified to be flown to a fire line as part of a “drop crew,” similar to the smokejumpers that have been among the first responders to forest fires for many years.

There is something special about that duty, he and the others said, especially if it means taking on a fire in your home state.

“I worked on reports at night during the Jasper fire two years ago,” said SPC Casey Brown. “This work is a lot more appealing than doing reports.”

At Press time the Oregon National Guard was most heavily involved in fire-fighting efforts in the West, with nearly 1,200 Army and Air Guard personnel supporting civilian agencies with UH-60 and CH-47 helicopters and crews. They also pulled security and provided logistical support to civilian agencies and an active-duty battalion from Fort Riley, Kan. □



**Colorado Guard MPs confer with a local police officer while helping control access to areas near the “Coal Seam” fire.**

MSG Bob Haskell